

**“TOO RED A HERRING”:  
The Unattainable Self in *The Unnamable***

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Brian McHale posits that the distinction between the modern and the post-modern lies in their respective emphases upon epistemological and ontological considerations. Samuel Beckett, long considered a liminal author, provides a bridge between the modern and the postmodern in *The Unnamable* in the shape (or lack thereof) of his unnamed character. Viewed from this light, *The Unnamable* provides answers for and yet demands further questions regarding both the modern and the post-modern.

Samuel Beckett is often cited as an author who bridges the literary world's transition from modernism to postmodernism. When one considers that Beckett was a protégé of James Joyce, one of the quintessential modernist authors – along with Kafka, Pound, Woolf, Neruda, Eliot, Faulkner – whose goal was to “make it new,” it seems appropriate that Beckett's work would contribute to a changing of the guard. The concerns of the modernists, according to Brian McHale in his article “What Was Postmodernism?” (and before that, in his *Postmodernist Fiction*) can be characterized as largely epistemological. Perhaps the most notable aspect of their writing, especially that of later modernist fiction writers like Céline, Bataille and Rhys, is the focused and intensified experience of the self. Whether that experience is one of elation, subjugation, trauma of a sexual or violent nature, or boredom, Céline's Ferdinand, Bataille's Simone and Rhys's Sasha feel and think the way any character does, but to the greatest extreme of feeling, the greatest extreme of thought. These experiences reveal new sides to the respective characters and inform the reader as to what it is to live in the world as this character.

McHale writes that the transition to post-modernism was emblematic of a shift in focus from the epistemological to the ontological. As he puts it, “This is the distinction that I developed. Modernist fiction was preoccupied with what we know and how we know it; with

the accessibility and reliability of knowledge; it explored epistemological questions. Postmodernist fiction, by contrast, explored ontological questions – questions of being rather than knowing” (2008).

He suggests other possible distinctions between modernism and post-modernism, such as the double-coding effect of combining ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, but it is the shift in philosophical emphasis that reveals the most in Beckett. Clearly, the distinction between epistemology and ontology is a tenuous one, as one cannot examine the act of being without in some way considering the self that is doing the work of being. However, when one investigates the nature of the conflicts encountered by Beckett’s characters, it becomes clear that it is the act of existing at all that the author is ultimately questioning. That is to say, it is not the act of living in a certain country in a certain time period as a person with certain sensibilities, but simply living at all, in any space, at any time, as any being. And, as he demonstrates in many of his works, he is interested in the act of existing where spatial relations are uncertain and when temporal relations are unclear for a being whose corporeality is stripped away.

In *Postmodern Fiction* McHale writes, “Samuel Beckett makes the transition from modernist to postmodernist poetics in the course of his trilogy” (12). While this is quite true, *The Unnamable* itself, the final novel in the so-called trilogy that includes *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, marks a gradual shift in emphasis from epistemological to ontological considerations. This is worth noting because in this single novel, Beckett creates a distilled effect of the trilogy as a whole. Whereas *Molloy* and *Malone* are far from traditional characters, they do feature identifiably human characteristics: backgrounds, memories, relatively unified voices and a familiarity with their environment, however sparse. The narrator of *The Unnamable* lacks any sense of definition. In essence, he lacks a self. The narration is given by a being – who will be referred to herein as the Unnamable – whose sense of self is diffuse, occupied by multiple voices, and who doggedly refutes each of his own statements about himself and the world which he inhabits. The Unnamable begins by asking questions and making assertions that carry epistemological concerns and gradually disregards them in favor of the ontological. This makes *The Unnamable* an exemplary text through which to study McHale’s assertion regarding the liminal shift in philosophical concerns between modernism and post-modernism,

worthy of more consideration than the handful of paragraphs McHale dedicates to it in *Postmodernist Fiction*.

Two points should be emphasized before proceeding. First, McHale posits this distinction between modernism and post-modernism as one of several ways of telling the difference between the two periods. He does not suggest it is only on these philosophical grounds that a work can be classified as belonging to one or the other period. This essay doesn't seek to set rigid guidelines either, nor to assert the preponderance of *The Unnamable* in Beckett's oeuvre or post-modern literature in general in any way other than its applicability to one part of McHale's answer to his titular question, "What Was Post-Modernism?"

Secondly, it should be noted that writings considering *The Unnamable* and the self are not in short supply. Fascinating historicist readings have been made recently by Gary Adelman and Alysia E. Garrison. Adelman makes an initial case for the *Unnamable* as representing a Holocaust survivor, noting Beckett's time spent in the Vaucluse among Jews who had fled from the Nazis, and using Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* as a literary lens: "In *The Unnamable*, the 'pensum,' the need to go on, to exist, to create a self adapted for life in the normal world, expresses an inner need to pay off a debt for not having died" (80). Garrison expands on this reading by explaining what she calls Beckett's "aesthetic of nonrelation," which refuses to directly address the events of the Holocaust: "Beckett's aesthetic of nonrelation witnesses the very oscillation between *constitutive absence* (the ontological, or trauma of being) and *historical loss* (historical trauma) that testifies to historically specific trauma while challenging the suppositions of humanism, ontology, and epistemology" (93; emphasis in the original).

It seems that many authors understand *The Unnamable* by placing its main character in a liminal space, either physical, metaphysical, or philosophical. Adrienne Janus seeks to resolve the respective critical views of French and Irish modernists by way of the *Unnamable*'s "empty tympanum vibrating between mind and world, belonging to neither" (180). Amir Ali Nojournian places Beckett's *Unnamable* somewhere between the actions of thought and being presented by Descartes: "Beckett's point of departure from Cartesian logic is the way the 'self' finally situates himself: 'in the middle' of this duality" (390). Chris Ackerley's study of voice in *The Unnamable* likens the

plot to “splitting the atom of self [...] no longer an integrated entity, strange new particles discovered within, yet no ultimate understanding reached and the location of the voice still a mystery” (47). Jonathan Boulter also situates the Unnamable in a sort of static middleground: “The Unnamable’s obligation, ‘the compulsion I am under,’ (302) is to assign meaning to the logic of ‘Being’ at the beginning, anticipating the (uninscribable?) end and thus writing the middle, the great gap of time” (98).

At least two authors have taken up the very subject in consideration here, but have found *The Unnamable* standing outside McHale’s modern/epistemological-post-modern/ontological poles. Russell Kilbourn states that “*The Unnamable* cannot be said to be exclusively preoccupied with either ontology or epistemology [...] neither a realist psychological nor a more self-reflexive, *avant garde* reading bears up under the pressure of Beckett’s superfluity of words” (79, n. 26). Derval Tubridy refers to McHale, stating, “One can argue that *The Unnamable* is a post-epistemological, post-linguistic novel, yet there are still words – words which proliferate and negate to form a text in which nothing is certain except necessity” (197). These readings seem to conceive of the novel as a static text which functions at the end the same as it does at the beginning. One purpose of this essay is to establish the *movement* that takes place in *The Unnamable*, the progress from modern to post-modern concerns.

### **The Transition**

*The Unnamable* begins with three questions that indicate the narrator’s state of confusion concerning his situation: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that” (285). The chief concern of the first portion of the novel is with defining the Unnamable’s environment, the characters that may or may not occupy it, and with determining the Unnamable’s physical state, all of which indicate an attempt to define a self.

“Malone is there,” the novel’s third paragraph begins. This establishes the possibility of a relationship: “He passes before me at doubtless regular intervals” (286). Here, the Unnamable provides a spatial relationship to Malone. He explores the possibility further on 289, asserting, “No, he wheels, I feel it, and about me, like a planet about its sun.” The Unnamable concerns himself with his selfhood by con-

cerning himself with the possibility of a relationship – even if only a spatial one – with these humans that the reader is assumed to know fairly well. Here, he attempts to answer the question, “Where now?”: “But the best is to think of myself at the centre of this place, whatever its shape and extent may be” (289). By at least temporarily establishing his position in the relationship, that of “the sun” being orbited by an outside subject, the Unnamable begins to trace the outline of a self. Nonetheless, this concept of his location is ultimately indeterminate: “I don’t know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be” (295). The fragmentation of these thoughts reinforces the indeterminacy of the Unnamable’s sense of location.

The Unnamable moves from this question of his spatial relationship to Malone to a question of his origin: “For I am obliged to assign a beginning to my residence here, if only for the sake of clarity” (289). This is the beginning of an attempt to answer, “When now?” He continues, “Hell itself, dates from the revolt of Lucifer. It is therefore permissible, in the light of this distant analogy, to think of myself as being here forever, but not as having been here forever.” His sense of his beginning remains convoluted, despite further theorizing on the origin of his “place,” but we are left with the possibility that his existence may be eternal. As with the notion of his location, his “where,” the question of the Unnamable’s beginning and end, his “when,” ultimately goes unanswered.

The next important consideration is of his physical state. These thoughts begin the single paragraph which comprises the remaining 110 pages of the novel. The paragraph starts by reiterating that the Unnamable knows nothing about himself, his self: “I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly” (298). The Unnamable attempts to determine what comprises his body by way of the physical sensations of tears against his body. In that first sentence, he establishes that he has eyes: “For I feel my tears coursing over my chest, my sides, and all down my back” (299). This temporarily establishes that he has a chest, sides and back, a torso. He attempts to describe his face: “They gather in my beard and from there, when it can hold no more – no, no beard, no hair either, it is a great smooth ball I carry on my shoulders, featureless, but for the eyes, of which only the sockets remain” (299). He has lost his eyes. He has no face. When he decides to stop weeping, he thereby

loses the torso established earlier: "I'll dry these streaming sockets too, bung them up, there, it's done, no more tears, I'm a big talking ball [...]. And after all why a ball, rather than something else, and why big? Why not a cylinder, a small cylinder? An egg, a medium egg?" The Unnamable's inability to establish a physical body for himself completes his lack of a physical identity. He has no "when," no "where," and in a physical sense, no "who."

Perhaps most importantly, the Unnamable spends time considering the question "What am I?" raising certain implicit assertions regarding what type of being he is. For example, when he considers the prospect that he may continue to exist forever in his space, like Lucifer in Hell, he takes himself outside of the human population. On page 291, he asks, "Why did I have myself represented in the midst of men, the light of day?" The implication here is that the Unnamable is not a man, a possibility that becomes more salient when he decides he is just as likely a cylinder or an egg-shaped mass as he is a creature with a torso, face and beard.

Those questions that introduce us to our narrator's problem, "Where now? Who now? When now?" are fundamentally epistemological questions. Definitive answers would provide a definitive self. As the Unnamable makes the determination that he is an "I, of whom I know nothing," he often mentions the possibility that these epistemological considerations are not important. This is the first step in his transition toward the ontological. On page 288, he asks a question that fits the definition of epistemology, and turns away from it with seeming indifference: "Can it be that I am prey of a genuine preoccupation, of a need to know as one might say? I don't know. I'll try it another way." The "need to know" recognizes an interest in truth, the question of which appears a few pages later and is again recognized the wrong concern: "In the frenzy of utterance the concern with truth. [...] But not so fast. First dirty, then make clean" (293-94).

Along with these examples of simply turning away from the questions he raises, he makes brief interjections into the midst of lengthy thoughts that proceed contiguously and render meaningless the entire logical process that has taken place. In a passage quoted earlier in part, the word "unimportant" appears, with no specific referent, in such a way that it may apply to the entire fragmented sentence. Here is the whole sentence:

I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little sufficiently, I don't know how, *unimportant*, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be.

(295; emphasis added)

One takes this as an indication that the concerns he raises here with respect to his capacity to speak, think, understand relationships and his location in time and space are unimportant to him, that they are not the real questions at hand. Again, he is moving toward a general dismissal of the epistemological realm.

A similar phenomenon takes place a page later, when the Unnamable leaves the answer to the question of his desire to understand his "where" up to the reader: "I shall begin to know something, just enough for it to turn out to be the same place as always [...] which I seem to want and do not want, *take your choice*, which spews me out or swallows me up, I'll never know" (296; emphasis added). Since it is his sense of self that hangs in the balance, it seems like it would be extraordinarily odd for the Unnamable to let the reader decide if he wants to understand his surroundings, unless, as one is left to assume, he is indifferent to questions the answers to which would comprise an identity.

After asserting many times that the epistemological questions ("Where am I?" "When am I?" "Who am I?" "What am I?") may not matter, the Unnamable gradually moves on to ontological questions, "How am I?" and "Why am I?" The answers to these questions do not reflect a self. Instead, they turn outward to the world, the universe. They are questions regarding the process of living, the nature of being, questions of origin that go beyond the physical aspect of conception and birth. As the novel progresses, the Unnamable raises more and more possibilities regarding the nature of existence. On page 359, he postulates that existence may be defined by the suffering caused by the pursuit of understanding: "To see the light, they call that seeing, no objection, since it causes him suffering, they call that suffering, they know how to cause suffering, the master explained to them, Do this, do that, you'll see him squirm, you'll hear him weep." Here, the Unnamable reasons an understanding of being through suffering,

which recalls his earlier attempt to gain a concept of his physical body through the sensation of his ceaseless tears. He attempts to understand existence the same way he sought to define a self, but by reducing the emphasis on the physical. Later, he says, “I doubted my own existence, and even still, today, I have no faith in it, none, so that I have to say, when I speak, Who speaks [...] for things that happen must have someone to happen to” (384). Because he has no “who,” the Unnamable doubts his own existence, his own ability to experience. Eventually, as he is about to cease existing, the Unnamable determines that his speech enables him to be. “That’s all words, never wake, all words, there’s nothing else, you must go on, that’s all I know, they’re going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they’re going to abandon me, it will be the silence [...] you must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any” (407).

By the end of the novel, the Unnamable’s thoughts and assertions represent a being for whom the bodiless state in which thinking is representative of existence is quite real. Reaching this Cartesian state – in which thought determines one’s existence – is a process that takes place not only over the course of *The Unnamable*, but over the course of the entire trilogy. Beckett begins with his most narrative story, in which Molloy actually performs in the world, out among the living, riding his bike, killing a dog. Many of those types of external actions and happenings are removed by the time we reach *Malone Dies*, in which Malone sits in a room, writes stories and, of course, dies. In this section of the trilogy, Beckett shows us a man in a room, with a pencil, writing stories and withering away. The Unnamable is what is left once the human beings in the story have died. Maybe what we find in *The Unnamable* is Beckett’s conception of the afterlife. In any event, we are left with a character with no body, no sense of self, no experience except that of his own voice: in principle, one who speaking, therefore is, and eventually stops speaking, and therefore is no longer.

### **The Unnamable’s Influences**

As *The Unnamable* makes this transition from mostly epistemological concerns to ontological thinking, there are two characters that arise and nudge the Unnamable in opposing directions. These characters, chiefly referred to as Mahood and Worm, appear with some regularity throughout the course of the novel. Their presence in the novel is different from that of Malone and Molloy in that there is no evidence of

it aside from the Unnamable's questionable testimony, which is questionable for its ceaseless questioning. While the Unnamable attempts to discern the thought-to-be orbiting character as either Malone or Molloy by his physical characteristics – “The brimless hat seems to me conclusive” (286) – Mahood and Worm are known to the Unnamable simply by their influence on him, and each influences him differently.

Mahood is made known to the reader as a voice that sometimes seems to possess the Unnamable, to take over start to run the show:

I never saw him, I didn't see him, he has told me what he is like, what I am like [...]. It isn't enough that I should know what I'm doing, I must also know what I'm looking like. This time I'm short of a leg. And yet it appears I have rejuvenated. That's part of the programme. Having brought me to death's door, senile gangrene, they whip off a leg and yip off I go again, like a young one, scouring the earth for a hole to hide in.

(309)

Immediately after telling the reader that Mahood tells the Unnamable what he “is like,” the Unnamable begins to give us the kind of information about him that we've been missing, namely a physical description (one leg), actions (whipping, yipping, scouring) and comparisons (“like a young one”) that are the beginnings of actual narrative. Mahood is the storyteller, and yet because of the way we receive his stories, it is unclear to the reader whether Mahood is actually distinct from the Unnamable, whether he is definitely a separate entity. The Unnamable doesn't preface the quasi-narratives above with “Mahood tells me,” etc. He simply recites the story as new information, new thoughts of his own making. The Unnamable poses the question of this distinction as well: “What if we were one and the same after all, as he affirms, and I deny?” he asks. Soon after asking, he states, “There we are face to face, Mahood and I, if we are twain, as I say we are” (309).

This question of whether Mahood and the Unnamable are one or twain comes after the point in the novel when the Unnamable has made it clear that his physical state is indefinite, if it exists at all, so one must consider the possibility that his encounter with Mahood – another character of mysterious physicality – is a metaphysical one. In

this instance, the term “face to face” is simply a useful idiom. More to the point, if this is a realm comprised solely by the Unnamable’s consciousness, we must consider Mahood’s voice an alternative side of the Unnamable’s psyche. This storyteller, then, trying to impose stories and memories upon the Unnamable is in fact the Unnamable himself trying to find and form a self through story, through narrative.

When Worm first appears on page 331 (“It’s time I gave this solitary a name [...]. I therefore baptise him Worm.”), we are told he is unique, and yet that he serves the same purpose as Mahood: “Before Mahood, there were others like him, of the same breed and creed, armed with the same prong. But Worm is the first of his kind. [...] I must not forget I don’t know him. Perhaps he too will weary, renounce the task of forming me and make way for another, having laid the foundations.” Worm’s task then, is the same as Mahood’s, to form a “me” for the Unnamable. The Unnamable ruminates on the possibility that he could be Worm, or Mahood, or both: “For if I am Mahood, I am Worm too, plop. Or if I am not yet Worm, I shall be when I cease to be Mahood, plop” (331-32).

Worm is also seen as an attempt to understand Mahood, which we must take as an attempt on the part of the Unnamable to understand himself, since Mahood is one of his aspects: “I knew I had only to try to talk of Worm to begin talking of Mahood, with more felicity and understanding than ever” (333). Yet the Unnamable has already, earlier on the same page, acknowledged the slippery slope inherent in his attempt to understand himself by way of other characters. After mentioning the possibility of yet another character – his soul, a she – he says, “That brings us up to four, gathered together. I knew it, there might be a hundred of us and still we’d lack the hundred and first, we’ll always be short of me.” This concept of falling short necessarily indicates a deliberate attempt to form a “me.” At this point in the novel, the Unnamable possesses a desire to form and understand a self. But despite his assertion that this process of coming up with a new character to understand a character who himself was conjured to understand another character is a process that grants no new angle from which to view the initial character, he returns immediately to the process: “Perhaps it’s by trying to be Worm that I’ll finally succeed in being Mahood, I hadn’t thought of that. Then all I’ll have to do is be Worm. Which no doubt I shall achieve by trying to be Jones” (333). The constantly overlapping, two-steps-forward, one-step-back style of

the Unnamable's logic makes the novel's progress slow, complex and difficult, but understandably so, as we have a character struggling to let go of the possibility that he can form a self, and struggling to accept the fact of his condition, that he must simply be.

There is a bit more to understand about Worm. As the Unnamable says, he is unique. While Mahood is characterized by his voice, Worm is characterized by his silence. We learn more about Worm and his silence later in the novel as the Unnamable approaches his own ultimate silence. On page 340, the Unnamable describes Worm as "The one ignorant of himself and silent, ignorant of his silence and silent, who could not be and gave up trying," and later on 350, "Worm, who says nothing, knows nothing." In a world in which speech comprises existence, silence is the manifestation of death. Once we determine that Worm is the way to silence, we understand that to approach him is to approach death.

### **The Mediation**

Through this analysis, Mahood and Worm become antitheses of one another: Mahood is the voice that compels the Unnamable to seek selfhood, to speak, to tell stories and continue to exist; Worm is the absence of voice, non-existence. In his article, "On Not Having the Last Word: Beckett, Wittgenstein and the Limits of Language," Bruce Kawin interprets Worm and Mahood as lying on opposite ends of a lingual spectrum:

These alternates represent poles of language. If he were Worm, he would not speak at all, even to try to name himself: he would just be Worm, the existential equivalent of a Black Hole. When words try to deal with Worm, they address not the silence, in which there may be some kind of Being, but absolute negation. When they handle Mahood, they are on holiday, spinning stories, their nouns and verbs apparently applying to real things and actions in a welcome escape from self-consciousness.

(190)

This somewhat reiterates the points made above, but Kawin's next assertion is especially useful: "The Unnamable occupies a middle ground. It is difficult for words to find something to say about him

because he has no story, but relatively easier and more valuable than to surrender to Worm.”

In the novel, the Unnamable often seems to be trying to escape the influence of Mahood while also not falling into the “Black Hole” of Worm’s realm: “The essential is never to arrive anywhere, never to be anywhere, neither where Mahood is, nor where Worm is, nor where I am, it little matters thanks to what dispensation. The essential is to go on squirming for ever at the end of the line” (332). Here, he seems to embrace the process of forever traveling between Kawin’s two poles, to be forever in the “middle ground,” “squirming.”

This idea of the Unnamable as a sort of mediating device between story and silence, between an existence that affirms a self and nonexistence works as a metaphor for the novel’s transition from epistemological to ontological concerns. Kawin views the Unnamable as the novel’s own consciousness, something akin to the science-fiction idea of artificial intelligence that becomes self-aware, capable of independent thought. The Unnamable can also serve as a representative of a literary history that has become aware of its entanglement with philosophy, with its preoccupation with the intensified experience of the self, and which seeks another way to move forward without going mute. This is the dilemma of postmodernism: how to move forward differently than the modernists. Beckett’s Unnamable offers one solution in the navigation between two poles of language.

The problem with this is that it assumes there is a middle ground, that there is a space where a speaking voice can exist, think and feel without having a sense of self. The Unnamable recognizes this complication: “But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring. I’ll get out of my depth if I’m not careful. But what then is the subject? Mahood? No, not yet. Worm? Even less” (336). The Unnamable thinks of the concept of a self, an ‘I,’ as “too red a herring.” That is to say that for the Unnamable selfhood is unattainable. But in order to speak and reason, he must have a self. Even a narrator who would simply observe the outside world, saying, “There crawls a bug, a plane flies overhead,” needs to have answers to the epistemological questions of who, what, when and where in order to have a vantage point. With this in mind, the Unnamable continues to make use of the vertical pronoun despite its problematic nature for him.

Through this constant mediation of selfhood and nonexistence, the Unnamable becomes a duplicitous being:

Perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.

(376)

He is a being who seeks to be and also not to be, to speak and to find silence, who must go and can't go on. He is often characterized in oxymoronic terms, like when he refers to his own speech as "the dead tongue of the living" (331). The novel's ending is then an appropriate standoff between these two compulsions, to live and to die. The novel ends on a four-page sentence that eventually works itself to a point of speaking in binaries: "It will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, [...] you must say words, as long as there are any, [...] it will be I, it will be the silence, [...] you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (407). Of course, because the novel ends, there is one final contradiction. Though he says he will go on, he does not. But because this contradiction is an implicit one, it can neither be trusted nor ignored, and the reader is left with the task of deciding how seriously he takes the possibility that the Unnamable ceases to be when he ceases to speak. With most novels, if the character says he will go on, we imagine that in the diachronic reality of the story, he does in fact go on. This, however, is not the case for the Unnamable, whose last words in print are the last of his existence.

The constant oscillation between the self-affirming "I" and non-existence brings the narrative *The Unnamable* to a standstill. While progress is made in the transitions noted above, eventually the Unnamable fights himself on two fronts. The static nature of the book's conclusion reflects a theory posed by McHale that outlines another way that postmodernism works to oppose the modernist project. McHale argues that one way in which postmodernism could differentiate itself from modernism would be "to adopt a temporality of *stasis* in contradistinction to modernism's dynamism" (2008; emphasis in the original). In the same way that the modernist project of constantly moving forward, consuming one innovation with another, was reflected in the radically vibrant plots and characters of its novels, the post-

modernist project is reflected in the Unnamable's constant process of self-contradiction and his frozen state of oscillation, like an object that moves back and forth with such speed as to appear to be motionless.

Finally, *The Unnamable* leaves us, as readers and writers who may assume or counter the postmodern project, with a few observations. To "say I," as the Unnamable states is his task at the outset of the novel, claims selfhood, but at the same time erases a sense of self, because, as he discovers, no self is singular. But it is through attempting to pin down an understanding of existence as a being who thinks and feels but does not claim a self that the Unnamable ceases to exist. *The Unnamable* teaches us that in attempting to define ourselves, one way or another, we risk eliminating our 'selves.'

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